PYGMALION: AN OPERA IN ONE ACT
Storytelling, Music, and Meta-Creativity

by

Erica Kudisch

B.A. Vassar College, 2006

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Pittsburgh

2008

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

This thesis was presented

by

Erica Rachel Kudisch

It was defended on

April 21, 2008

and approved by

Mathew Rosenblum, Professor, School of Music

Amy Williams, Assistant Professor, School of Music

Thesis Director: Anna Nisnevich, Assistant Professor, School of Music

PYGMALION: **AN OPERA IN ONE ACT**

Storytelling, Music, and Meta-Creativity

Erica Kudisch, M.A.

University of Pittsburgh, 2008

Pygmalion is the second chamber opera I have written, but the largest and most ambitious work of mine to date that will be performed publicly. As such, I consider it a culmination of all I have learned in the Master of Music: Composition Program here at the University of Pittsburgh. In addition to the relevance of the *Pygmalion* subject to the craft of composition, and to the field of music itself, there are several converging factors that contribute to the relationship between this work and my own education. What follows is a musicological and theoretical discussion of the processes involved in the creation and construction of this opera; its thematic and musical conception, the libretto, the composition, the instrumentation, and ultimately the relationship between the composer and the work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

PREFACE

Credit where credit is due; the graduate faculty at Pitt has been extremely patient with and tolerant of me. I thank especially Amy Williams and Eric Moe for their direct guidance on the musical projects of my first three semesters, and for their overall contribution to my advancement with the craft. I also extend thanks to Mathew Rosenblum for his time, thoughtfulness, and inspiration, and to Anna Nisnevich for serving as my advisor, editor, and as an enthusiastic ear.

Pygmalion would never have gotten off the ground without Mary Beth Sederburg, producer and founder of Undercroft Opera, also Aphrodite; Federico Garcia, conductor and founder of Alia Musica (and for his invaluable help with orchestration, I cannot thank him enough); Rebekah Hill, rehearsal pianist and music director; Sally Denmead, stage director and master of puppets; Kerrith Livengood, flute; Amy Galbraith, oboe; Julieta Ugartemendia, clarinet; Mark Fromm, bassoon; Deb Scharf, French horn; Ana Diaz, cello; and Robert Frankenberry, Andrew Boag, Carissa Kett, and Gail Novak, the cast.

So many people have abided me during all the stages of this process. Here's to everyone in #ri, for keeping me, if not sane, at least on task; Harold Meltzer, for the phone calls; my parents and siblings, for trying to understand; Ben Harris, Elizabeth Hoover, Matt Gillespie, and

James Ogburn for proximity and encouragement; Erin Mulligan, Marci Carper, and Jerry Farmer, for *getting* it; and Eric Hausdorfer, for being with me always.

Also, Kelly Mermelstein and Marie Wyatt, whose fault it is.

1.0   INTRODUCTION

Graduate School did not cure me of my inclination toward narrative music. I am not sure I wanted it to, which renders the point moot. I believe I have too emphatic and powerful a legacy in the world of words to divorce the music I create from it. I have always been a singer, and I have always been a storyteller, and I have come to think of my music as another manner in which I can present stories and thoughts.

I do not think this ideal is contrary to the nature of music itself. Yes, music can be abstract, and in some cases *must* be; the margin of error in communicating a specific idea to an audience through song is much vaster than it is for words in a common language. Even in a case where music itself is a common language, such as in music academia and among concert-goers, composers still rely on broad applications of not entirely musical means of signification or multi-media in order to evoke a desired response from the audience. My intent with opera as communication is often too complex, and too specific, to be projected through music alone, or through words alone, or through gesture alone.

Wagner's ideal of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, his union of *Tanz, Ton, und Ticht,* is a subject that has been nagging at my shoulder like the talons of a hawk for quite some time. His statements of opera as synthesis—or the convergence of diverse arts to illuminate as many facets of the story or situation as possible—ring true to me. My prose is intrinsically musical, relying on poetic

conventions, rhythm, and the oral tradition; my music is wordy, and even if a given work is not an outright text-setting, it probably has impetus from the world of words, or a narrative arc, or even literary conventions such as irony and dialog. Neither of these media can be dissociated from their performative aspect; my written works are best read aloud, and my music must be performed, not merely read, in order to be communicated.

Why this opera? Why *Pygmalion?* That is a story all its own.

I will be honest; I had some idea that the situation of my personal life and academic life would affect the execution of the work. I always intended *Pygmalion* to be, at least on one plane of understanding, about the craft of composition and the relationship of the composer to the craft. At some point, it also became about authorial intent, about the balance between academic complexity and populist accessibility, and about my own relationship to the academic world; on the level of the University of Pittsburgh and on the level of academic composition as a field. To some extent, I am the work. To some extent, that is true of any work. When *Pygmalion* screams to Aphrodite, "She isn't you, she isn't you", part of what he's saying is "She's me."

2.0   THE LIBRETTO

2.1   CONCEPTION

My relationship with the *Pygmalion* myth began with a post to my blog on September 23, 2006. I

wrote a poem commemorating my first Rosh Hasshana in Pittsburgh, and it contained the stanza:

Spilled hot water, blisters, shameless flirting.
I see a face in the crowd that I shouldn't,
miss things that never transpired
(and transpired is such a presumptuous word,
tranSpire,
to breathe,
as if the notion was fully formed and just never given a Pygmalion kiss),
and return home, to cleaning
and compulsiveness.

The dissertation of life is being defended,
and for a moment I hope I never understand.

This prompted a friend of mine to ask what a Pygmalion kiss was, believing it to be a

reference to the George Bernard Shaw *Pygmalion* rather than to the Ovid. Instead of forwarding

her to the Ovid, though, I spent the next few days writing a short story version of the myth,

which I posted to my blog on September 29. My version of the story took some liberties with the

plot. Most notably, rather than having Pygmalion summon Aphrodite, my story had the goddess

taking an interest in him and his talent first. I also tampered with the story's happy resolution.

However, I was displeased with the short story and ultimately decided that it may not have been

the best format to communicate my idea of *Pygmalion,* and that opera would better convey the thematic complexities of the tale.

I wrote the first draft of the libretto not too long after that. It was in the same rather overwrought language as the original short story. The Narrator spoke in iambic pentameter, sometimes in sonnet form, Aphrodite did the same, and Pygmalion spoke in rather evocative, image-heavy and convoluted free verse. I presented this draft of the libretto to Eric Moe, my composition teacher at the time, who instantaneously vetoed the idea. "No one is going to understand this," he said, "especially not if they're going to be singing. You have to get the hell out of the nineteenth century!" At his suggestion, I revised the libretto to put it into more of a colloquial idiom, even though I did keep Pygmalion's language free verse. Eric Moe's words— *get the hell out of the nineteenth century—*also made it into the opera as a running gag. Ultimately, the choice to retell the libretto in a more readily understood format changed the face of the opera.

2.2   PLOT SYNOPSIS

After the overture, a Narrator (who will later become our Galatea) pitches the scenario to the audience; the gods have rules in place that prevent them from actually causing harm to the artists, who in turn are responsible for glorifying the gods. (This story, it turns out, is one of those times where a goddess, Aphrodite, bends that rule.) Pygmalion is then introduced as a bitter, anti-establishment artist who is determined to use his gift to bring the gods down. Aphrodite bemoans the extent of his talent and her inability to just kill him and be done with it.

But it occurs to her that there is a way around the rule. She decides to show *Pygmalion* just how powerful and beautiful the gods are, and to inspire him until he uses his artistic craft to benefit divinity.

The duet that ensues is best summarized as follows:

APHRODITE: Hello, Pygmalion.

PYGMALION: Get the hell out of my house.

APHRODITE: I want you to work for me.

PYGMALION: Get the hell out of my house. *[His statement is that "Tears from a stone are another legend."]*

APHRODITE: *[takes her clothes off]*

PYGMALION: …all right, go stand in the corner.

Pygmalion hears another voice lingering in the room, a voice that does not belong to Aphrodite; he sees, suddenly, the potential to display the craft that he actually cares for. Yet even though he is immersed in the process of creating Galatea, Pygmalion is unable to look away from something as beautiful and terrifying as Aphrodite.

Later, when Aphrodite arrives to appraise the statue, she is struck by what Pygmalion has done; in making as strong an authorial decision as he did, and in deviating from her commission to a great extent, Pygmalion has impressed himself on the work and preserved the intent of the artist, effectively immortalizing himself. Aphrodite, however, still wants the statue for her own, but Pygmalion refuses to give it to her, citing as an excuse that he has not fulfilled her commission. Aphrodite offers Pygmalion power in place of the love she would ordinarily have taught him; this is the last straw, and Pygmalion flatly refuses. The statue's voice is heard, but neither Pygmalion nor Aphrodite is listening; desperately, Pygmalion kisses the statue, silencing

everyone and everything. Galatea responds, and thus Pygmalion has chosen his payment; love. Aphrodite returns the statue to its original stone form, giving Pygmalion what he initially wanted from her: "Tears from a stone." The goddess leaves Pygmalion alone with the statue and his newfound humility, and the artist, in a blind rage, decides to destroy his work.

2.3   OVERT THEMES

Perhaps the most evident theme of my *Pygmalion* is the relationship between the creator and the work. The added complication of the commissioner—in this case, Aphrodite—calls the notion of "to whom does the work belong" into question as well. On one level, *Pygmalion* is "an opera about an intellectual property dispute".

The other theme that I consciously evoked throughout the opera was that of academic or "artistically meritorious" composition in contest with populist or "accessible" composition. This is a distinction I have grappled with throughout my career as a composer, writer, and performer, both as imposed by my instructors and as a matter of practicality. Pygmalion emblematizes the extreme "artistic" position, both in his imagery-laden and excessively metaphorical language and in his avant-garde and unapologetically atonal music; Aphrodite represents the more readily understood stylistic and tonal conventions, and speaks colloquially. These two ideals are shown in musical and dialectical opposition throughout the opera.

The clashing perspectives form the most decisive arc of the opera's action. Aphrodite, a corporate and populist entity, attempts to use the artist's gifts for her own gain; Pygmalion refuses adamantly to be used, even going so far as to withhold his eventual artistic product from

the commissioner on the grounds that he deviated from her original idea. At the end, the dispute is thus over whether the work belongs to the commissioner and the populist world, namely the audience, or to the artist and, implicitly, the analysts and adjudicators of the artistic community. Galatea, as the work itself, ultimately belongs to neither, and comes to life of her own accord once the artist gives her identity. The artist is responsible for silencing her, the corporation for disabling her. I chose to have the opera "told" from the perspective of the work—both expository segments, including the crucial opening, are related by Galatea—in order to communicate the work's agency and independence from both the creator and the commissioner. That the audience is only partly aware that the Narrator will become Galatea also contributes to the work's identity, marked by a lack of self-sufficiency, as she is vulnerable to being subjugated by the commissioner and unmade by the creator. In this way the opera comments on modern copyright practice. A work, while potentially meritorious on its own, cannot survive in its intended state without the blessing of its creator, nor can it be disseminated without the support of its commissioner.

My opera advocates a balance between these respective forces. Its Galatea speaks in a language that is neither as colloquial as Aphrodite's nor as metaphorical as Pygmalion's, and the music she is associated with is not conceptually extremist in either direction. However, this stylistic middle-ground is not compromise. When a compromise is attempted toward the end of the opera, the work is destroyed due to its ineffectiveness. When one treats the ideals of artistry and accessibility as diametrically opposed concepts, it is impossible to reconcile them. Hence the comparatively bleak ending, and hence my revision of the original Ovid.

3.0   MUSICAL ORGANIZATION

3.1   STRUCTURE

Pygmalion is a number opera; the score is divided into nine titled movements, all of which are performed *attacca*.

> I. Overture *(Instrumentalists)*
> II. Elevator Pitch *(aria, Galatea)*
> III. Working Song *(aria, Pygmalion)*
> IV. Proposal, Cavatina, and Interrupted Cabaletta *(aria, Aphrodite)*
> V. Duet which is really a Trio *(Pygmalion, Aphrodite, briefly Galatea)*
> VI. Process Piece *(aria, Pygmalion)*
> VII. Interlude *(Galatea, Instrumentalists)*
> VIII. Appraisal *(aria, Aphrodite)*
> IX. Finale *(Pygmalion, Aphrodite, briefly Galatea, ends with Instrumentalists)*

The superstructure of the opera follows a general narrative trajectory that consists of an Introduction, Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, and usually a very brief Denouement. On the graphs that follow, the Y axis represents relative intensity as defined by volume, tempo, and density of texture. More forceful dynamics, acceleration, thickening or polarizing of textures, and increases in dramatic intensity and awkwardness all contribute to ascension along the graph's Y-axis.
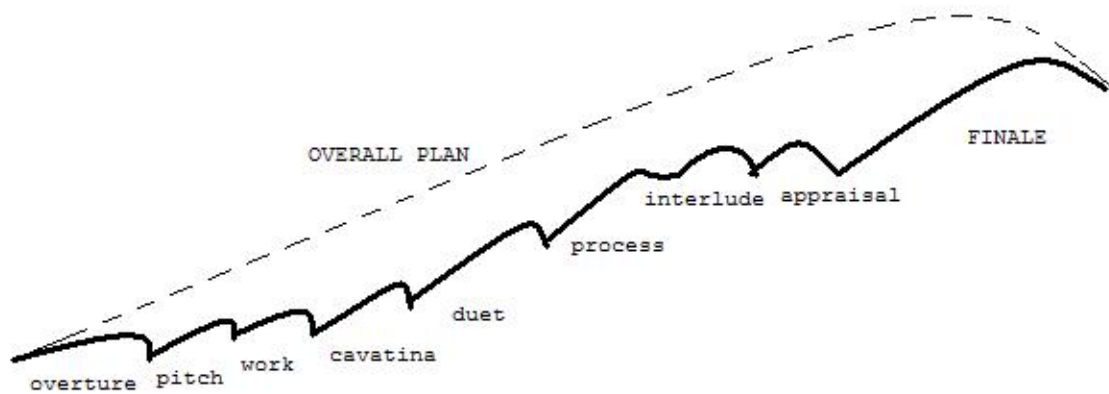
Figure 1: *Pygmalion* **structure**

As shown in Fig. 1, the musico-narrative development of each subsection is a microcosm of the overall structure. The *Overture* and *Finale* in particular emblemize the opera as a whole. Both sections begin with a drawn-out establishment of pitch class A, which I consider the near-tonic of this opera, then develop their respective main threads by departing from the tonic in question. There is a distinct increase in tempo and expansion of register in each piece, followed by a more subdued but still intense secondary theme, eventually building up to the cabaletta theme. There is a denied climax, and a rather ethereal, more *deus-ex-machina* than truly-stated, resolution of the pitch via the tuning fork. To demonstrate, the substructures of the *Overture* and *Finale* are shown as follows:
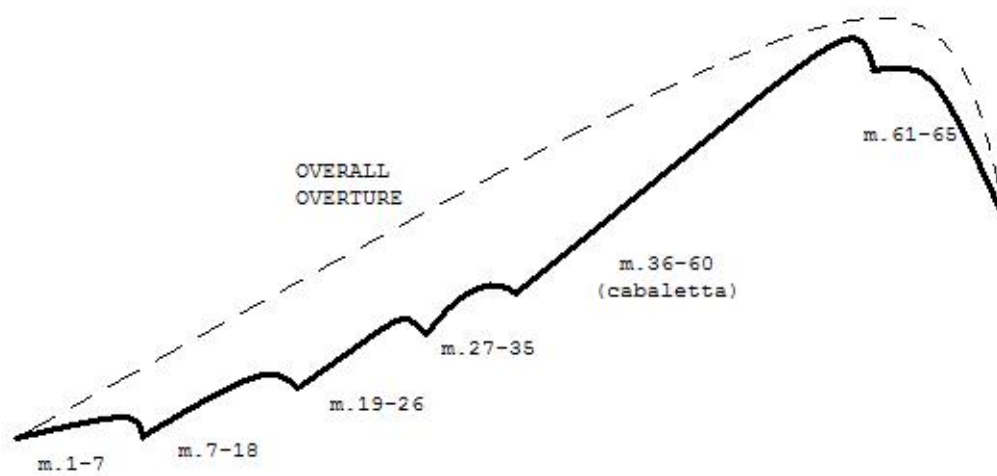
OVERALL
OVERTURE

m.61-65

m.36-60
(cabaletta)

m.27-35

m.19-26

m.7-18

m.1-7

Figure 2: *Overture* **structure**

OVERALL
FINALE

m.129-155

m.112-128

m.94-110

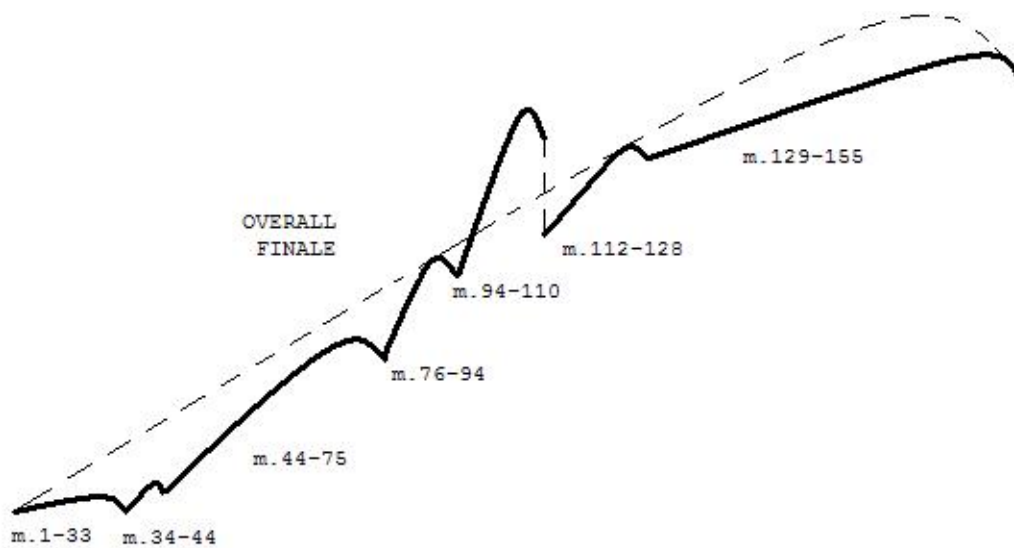m.76-94

m.44-75

m.1-33   m.34-44

Figure 3: *Finale* **structure**

Within these sections, a marked emphasis is placed on increases in volume, tempo, and complexity. The *crescendo* becomes the work's main *modus operandi.* The wedge-shaped narrative structure is conducive to the opera's intensity, and pervades the construction even on a

10

cellular level. The very first gesture of the overture is a crescendo growing out of one pizzicato A, and from the outset I eschewed the diminuendo wherever possible, using it almost exclusively for purposes of blending and emending the texture. This decision grew in part out of the eventual orchestration; the family of wind instruments, like the voice, can crescendo after a soft attack, whereas piano and percussion cannot.

3.2   FORM AS STYLE

Because the characters of Pygmalion and Aphrodite are, to polar extents, "stuck in the nineteenth century," I elected to apply classical musical forms to their arias. Pygmalion, because of his fixations, is associated with the form of the rondo. *Working Song* is a heartfelt reference to Hans Sachs' cobbling song in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg,* returning to the clarinet, key-clicks, and chiseling, with Pygmalion's sung admonitions as growling departures from that percussive texture. His second aria, *Process Piece,* is an outright elemental rondo, again with a percussive, pizzicato refrain that emphasizes the clarinet. However, the refrain in *Process Piece* undergoes more development than that of the *Working Song;* the verses paint the text and affect each restatement of the refrain. When Pygmalion compares Aphrodite to a shipwreck, the texture is murky and grows difficult to keep the pulse of, evoking the image of deep water, and the response of the refrain is to force itself into a higher register in order to escape the verse. The second verse evokes wind, with cello harmonic glissando and freewheeling piccolo, and the refrain that follows does away with the fragmented pizzicato, as if trying to ground itself.

11

Finally, Pygmalion compares Aphrodite to the Library of Alexandria on fire—a nightmarish catastrophe to an artist, even a radical one—and though the refrain resumes the same pitch classes and overall texture of its initial appearance, the pulse has quickened. The development of the rondo qualifies the development of Pygmalion's perspective. I will discuss this aria in more depth in a later section.

Aphrodite's form and style borrow most from the tradition of the *bel canto.* Her first aria is unpretentiously in the format appropriate to the genre: *Recitative, Cavatina,* and *(Interrupted) Cabaletta.* The recitative is peppered with intermittent statements in the double reeds, which then become the bass and arpeggio of the cavatina. My template for this aria was Bellini's *Eccomi / O quante volte,* from *I Capuletti e Montecchi,* and even though the orchestration and harmonic language deviates from Bellini's style, I retained the original form.

Perhaps the pun is trite, but Galatea is without form. The expository aria *Elevator Pitch* lays out the motifs but does not have any repeated or restated sections in and of themselves. Instead, Galatea introduces and begins to develop several of the opera's musical threads. Her brief second statement in the *Interlude* is not a restatement of these themes, but spurs one in the orchestra.

The *Duet* and *Finale* are both developmental forms with clear sectional divisions, but no repetition *within* the movement. However, both use motifs that have already been stated in the opera. After a recitative, the first division is a waltz; after another brief recitative (or punctuated section, in the case of the finale), it is followed by a contrasting section, not slower but with a darker texture. In both movements, once this slower section unwinds into the waltz form, it is followed by a statement of the main theme from the overture; Pygmalion's statement that "Tears from a stone are another legend" in the *Duet,* and Galatea's voice in the *Finale.* There is a

moment of silence after both of these statements. Even though she seems devoid of her own voice, Galatea is responsible for the work's cohesiveness. The symmetry between all of these disparate movements lends a sense of unity and something of an agency to the work's overall structure.

3.3   INSTRUMENTATION AND FACH

Pygmalion is scored for wind quintet and cello, with brief appearances by a tuning fork and one number featuring hammer and chisel. There are several matters at the heart of this decision, both artistic and practical.

In the narrative of this libretto, as well as in the original myth, breath is a focal device, in that either Aphrodite or Pygmalion *breathes* life into Galatea. From a musical standpoint, this device was particularly compelling to me, and I knew that even in a mixed ensemble I would rely heavily on the winds. There is a natural fragility to the concept of breath creating sound, and a very careful, strained *finiteness* to the micromanagement of five wind players. *Pygmalion* is forty minutes long, and while it would not be infeasible for a string quartet to play for that length of time without pause, it is impossible for a wind quintet to do so. The challenge appealed to me, but I did elect to balance the texture out with a double bass or a cello, settling on the cello when it became clear that I would be using harmonics and fast, melismatic passages that would not be idiomatic to the larger, less agile double bass. The cello is also more apt to blend with the wind family.

Scoring the opera for winds and cello provided the opportunity for a wealth of textures, many of which I capitalized on. Six unique instruments, even playing in their most "standard" articulations and timbres, still afford the composer a lot of opportunity for permutation and the creation of sub-families. Cello pizzicati provide a ringing attack that the wind instruments can expand from; this is the gesture that begins the opera. The variety of wind articulations and timbres also includes vocal percussion and key clicks, which I relegated only to the most percussive movement, *Working Song*. I strove for an overall texture that was not fragmented, and thus limited my application of extended techniques while still, in my opinion, avoiding a "sameness" of textures.

I composed the piano reduction first, but always with the eventual orchestration in mind. Of course I could never create a texture that incorporated more than six voices, unless accounting for double stops in the cello. I also had a vague idea of associating Aphrodite with the double reeds, based on my model for her *Cavatina*, and I came to correlate Pygmalion with the clarinet. I had already ascribed to the idea of the clarinet refrain for *Working Song* and the limits of orchestration were conducive to Pygmalion's prolonged connection to the instrument. The long, tonic-establishing section of the finale ultimately grew out of this decision and became a prolonged canon for the clarinet and oboe.

In terms of Fach, Aphrodite was always intended to be a mezzo-soprano, with strength at both extremes of the register and a dark, sultry quality to her voice. Galatea, construed as a younger version of the goddess, would thus be a full soprano, and when I was prompted to write the role to suit my own voice, she became a high coloratura. Pygmalion, however, was originally conceived as a baritone; however, the competitive element that grew out of his and Aphrodite's

music allows for both of them to shove into each others' range, and in the end I am pleased with the decision to write the role for a tenor.

3.4   TONALITY

The two hits of the tuning fork serve the explicit purpose of undermining all the wind and cello textures. There is no sound more opposite. By making the tuning fork an emblem of the opera, I signal to the audience that, perhaps, this opera as much about composition as it is about the visual arts. However, the primary function of the tuning fork is to both imply and deny the tonality of this opera.

The language of *Pygmalion* is not in accord with the tenets of tonal harmony, but reverent of them. Pitch class A natural, specifically the tuning fork A-440, is established as a tonal home and goal, and that pitch starts and ends the opera. My language throughout the orchestration is very chromatic, with quite a bit of expansion by thirds, and I would describe the chord confluences as coloristically dissonant. There is a hierarchy of pitch-class surrounding the application of A: E flat, as the tritone, is second in importance as the most extreme deviation; D natural, G natural (as VII), and B flat (as the Neapolitan) are considered tertiary, as neighboring tones and departures from the fourth, and each of these is tonicized at at least one point over the course of the opera. So, in essence, while I am not ascribing to rigid tonal harmony, I am applying its rules to a relatively dissonant framework and implying the presence of tonic, dominant, and predominant relationships. *Pygmalion* is ultimately neither tonal nor atonal.

The hexachord that introduces the opera, consisting of F, A, C#, D#, F#, and G#, projects the prominent intervallic relationships that dominate my harmonic language. The minor ninth (F / F#) and major seventh (A / G#) overlap; one fourth (D# / G#) is separated from another (C# / F#) by a major second; underneath, two corresponding major thirds outline an augmented triad (F, A, C#). While I do not use the chord itself to organize the opera, the extracted intervals and embedded chords establish the consonances and comfort levels of the harmonic language. In the later section on motifs, I will discuss the relationship of major thirds to Pygmalion and fourths to Aphrodite, as well as the gestural significance of the major second.

The manner in which I determine progression, as well as relative levels of consonance and dissonance, is based on similar relationships to the one within this hexachord. Because the chord itself is not an arrival, the confluence and density of the texture is considered dissonant. The operative gesture of the work is the *crescendo*, and as such the notion of progression revolves around the thickening of textures, with the thinning of textures implying arrival. More accurately, the *absence* of the pitches that have accumulated in order to thicken the texture is considered an arrival. So, in the case of the *Overture*, the first point of progression from the opening hexachord is marked by the melodic introduction of non-hexachord pitches, notably A#, which precipitate and chromatically approach the second theme's reliance on E and B. There is also a certain degree of character-illustration and motif use that informs the manner in which I modulate between sections.

The manners in which I apply tonality vary by movement and character. Of the character idioms, Aphrodite's is the most overtly tonal. *Cavatina* functions as if it is in Eb major or G minor but never actually achieves resolution along those lines. The *Recitative* section is also built with counterintuitive but mostly consonant, chromatic harmony, and I describe the section as

"Bellini on hallucinogenics"; the arpeggios that underscore the *Cavatina* are an echo of *O quante*

volte and other staples of the *bel canto,* but in a modern tonal scheme

Figure 4: *Cavatina* excerpt, "Bellini on Hallucinogenics"

Galatea's tonality is also generally consonant, but harmony proceeds for her in a more

overtly chromatic fashion, with an emphasis on minor thirds:

17

Figure 5: *Elevator Pitch* **excerpt**

In this first statement, Galatea's motif outlines the general *modus operandi* for her odd mix of Wagnerian and Jazz harmonies. Three standard, consonant chords—d minor, b flat minor 6, and G major 9/7—are undermined by the sudden establishment of E flat as the bass. The irony of Galatea's words is also a thrown bone to those who would analyze; "this is how it works", and that is, in fact, her cell, her motif, a departure from tonality but still a return to A.

Pygmalion, of the three, is characterized by what comes closest to an atonal idiom. *Working Song* is subversive of whatever tonal conventions underlined my initial draft, and

18

Process Piece, while there is more accord between the vocal line and the accompaniment than in the former aria, still eschews diatonicism at every possible turn.

Figure 6: *Process Piece* **excerpt**

There is, however, a general unified pitch-language that binds these three disparate idioms. Major sevenths, in particular, are constantly highlighted, and I place particular harmonic and motivic importance throughout on permutations of the fourth and the tritone.

Perhaps the strongest statement about the relevance of tonality to *Pygmalion* is in the *Finale,* the bulk of which is actually *eleven*-tone. After the last statement of the tonic, A-440, in measure 32, pitch class A natural is not sounded in any instrument or voice until the ringing of the tuning fork at the opera's end. During the seven minutes of the *Finale* without the use of

pitch class A, it is approached through various pedals and denied in several deceptive and half-cadences, including an E7 chord—a V7!—at the end of the canon at m.110. By denying tonality, I also apply it. Returning to the tonic A-440 via the tuning fork is thus a resolution of pitch according to the rules, but not one of texture; the gesture is intended to be bittersweet, undeniably concluding the show and the action but leaving the audience not entirely fulfilled.

3.5   MOTIF AND INTUITIVE COMPOSITION

My process of composition for *Pygmalion* was both thematic and motivic. While I did use several recurring cells, many of the referenced passages are much longer and developed exclusively within their own movements. There are six recurring shorter motifs used for development and construction.
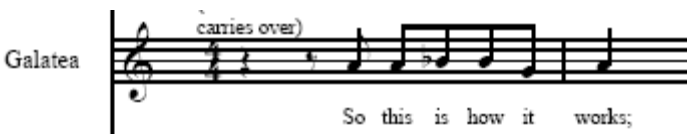
1:   *Main theme, "tears from a stone"*

Throughout the opera I extract several cells from the main theme, most notably the repeated and articulated major second that incites it. This becomes a prominent accompanimental figure and gesture, embedding itself in several lengthier themes. The melody of the *Cabaletta* and many iterations of the last syllables of "Pygmalion" grow out of this motif. The articulation of the gesture, emphasizing the short third beat, also establishes the waltz that pervades the entire opera.

20

2. *Aphrodite, "the rules"*

The gesture of a constant repeated fourth became the evocation of tension and brutal laughter, eventually growing into the cabaletta. It develops through alteration of the pitches, compressing and expanding the interval to include the tritone, especially in the *Finale*.

3. *Galatea, microcosm*

Nearly all of the *Elevator Pitch* is a development of this ironic little cell. By varying the repeated pitches of this motif but keeping the interval constant at first, and then melodically expanding the gesture into accompanimental patterns, the *Pitch* aria provides several of the lengthier themes that resurface throughout the rest of the opera. It is also a microcosm of the opera's overall tonal scheme: beginning and ending with A, departing to the Neapolitan and major second.

4. *Tonality*

The descending five-note scale (beginning with the half notes in this example) with a flat two is my general reminder of the relationship of tonality to the opera, emphasized by Galatea's remark, sung to this motif, that "[the artists] have to take a stance on the issue and acknowledge [the gods'] existence". While it is most often an instrumental figure, it reappears prominently during the eleven-tone finale as a means of subverting pitch class A.

5. slum-ber-ing wrapped in it like gold, *Pygmalion, anger*

The major third that Pygmalion outlines throughout *Working Song* determines the contour of many of his later statements. The banter in the *Duet* grows out of this, as does the emphasis on pedaled thirds throughout *Process Piece.* The theme of competition—"You can't refuse that." / "You can't afford me."—is a hybrid of this theme and the descending Tonality motif:

4a/5a. You can't re-fuse that.

6. An an-cient struc-ture burn-ing, *Fixation*

Finally, repetition and declamation on a static pitch is used from the outset to establish the obsession that pervades the opera. From the opening A expansion, the repetition of a single pitch becomes a grounding instrumental device, and Galatea's first statement of the kind— "Commercialism counts as a god"—brings the motif into the voices as well. This motif is featured in every voice part and nearly every instrument at least once, but most notably in the *Process Piece* where pulse and repetition are integral elements of the texture.

The intuitive aspect of *Pygmalion's* composition lies in the communication between the motifs of the libretto and the motifs in the music. Because the libretto quotes itself, and the characters repeat themselves often, it affords the opportunity in the scoring to foster irony and contradiction. Some themes are reiterated almost directly—"How does a Goddess pay a man,

22

save in pain" is altered only at the end of the statement when it is repeated—but other textual statements are greatly re-characterized by the music they are set to. Aphrodite's various takes on "I can't hurt you" afford several musical developments, expanding from that first descending minor second to the 4a. major third, and then to the tritone when she cites the honesty of her proposal. Overall, I wrote the text with the music in mind, and set it with the intent to bring out the motivic development of the words as well as the music.

3.6   IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF *PROCESS PIECE*

Process Piece is the first aria I completed for *Pygmalion.* While I wrote it first as a reduction and presented it to Eric Moe's composition seminar scored only for voice and piano, I composed it with the instruments in mind and consider it unplayable in its pianistic state. The sextet texture and the nature of the orchestration are integral to communicating the aria, and indeed my own *process* of composition for the opera. Through the application of literary means—irony, associations with the elements of nature, and the dramatic motivation of a change of perspective—to a series of musical executions, it provides a framework for understanding the opera from an interdisciplinary perspective.
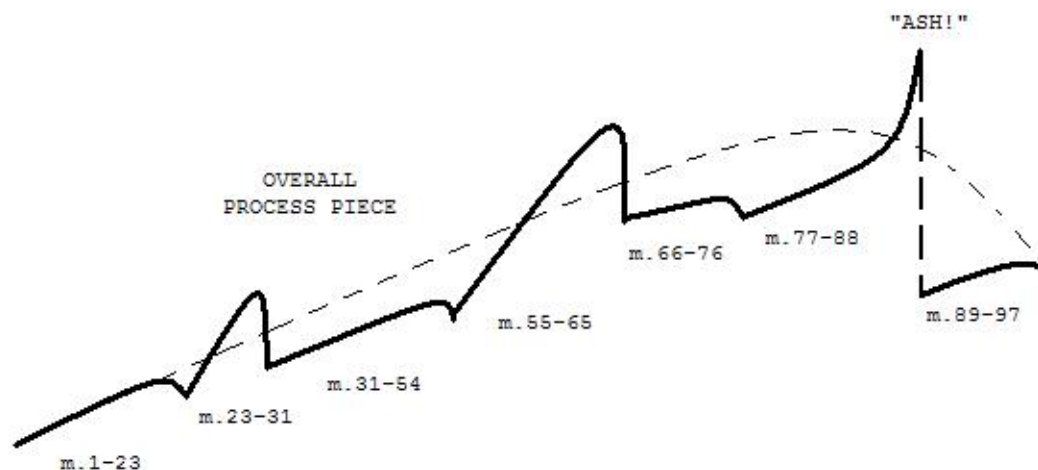
"ASH!"

OVERALL
PROCESS PIECE

m.66-76   m.77-88

m.55-65

m.89-97

m.31-54

m.23-31

m.1-23

Figure 7: *Process Piece* **structure**

Overall, *Process Piece* follows the prescribed wedge-contour of all of the movements. It is in rondo form; three elemental verses are divided by four iterations of a textural refrain. Instrumentally, the refrain is characterized by clarinet over flute, both of which work temporally against the cello playing pizzicato. However, the development is constant over the course of the aria and no two sections of the refrain are completely the same, though the first and the last mirror each other very closely.

Table 1. Characteristics of the *Process Piece* Refrain

Refrain	Texture	Time	Pitches	Other Notes
1 (m.1-23)	*clarinet and flute in alternating dyads over cello pizzicato *bassoon enters to elide sections	3 (clar./fl.) against 2 (cello)	M2 (B/Db) dyads alternating with M7 (Ab/G) over C pizz.	elided to the verse by the bassoon and tendencies toward 6|8
2 (m.31-54)	*clarinet and piccolo in alternating dyads over cello pizzicato *piccolo supersedes clarinet *oboe assumes clarinet role when clarinet takes on ascending runs	off-beats: *dyads iterate on 2 and 3 *pizzicato on "and" eighth-notes	emphasis on E M2, TT, M7 over A pizz	elided to the verse by the changed role of the clarinet
3 (m.66-76)	*clarinet and piccolo in counterpoint over cello tremolo	some hemiola, but otherwise no	emphasis on D, Eb, C#	not elided to the verse, texture breaks

24

	*additional bassoon fluttertongue over cello	hypermeter	over Db/C tremolo	up
4 (m.89-96)	*clarinet and flute in alternating dyads over cello pizzicato	2 (clar./fl.) against 3 on "and" eighth-notes (cello)	M2 (B/Db) dyads alternating with M7 (Ab/G) over C pizz.	

The respective elemental verses are responsible for inciting the alterations of the refrain. As previously stated, the first verse is meant to be evocative of water ("a shipwreck too far offshore to swim to"), the second of wind ("a gale in the distance"), and the third of fire ("an ancient structure burning"). The refrain returns to the idea of earth or clay, on which Pygmalion is fixated; metaphorically, the active elemental forces and natural disasters, or Aphrodite, are changing the earth, namely Pygmalion, and are thereby usurping his fixation.

Figure 8: *Process Piece,* **excerpt, first refrain**

As Table 1 and fig. 8 show, the first refrain is the simplest and most straightforward of the refrains, as is appropriate. The hypermeter begins when the first cracks show in Pygmalion's façade; in this case, the crack is probably literal, considering that the tenor is asked to be quiet in the upper register, on that off-beat, quick high A flat. Where the cello pizzicato had been on the beat, it is now off, signifying a rattled foundation. Shortly after this, Pygmalion's vocal statement that Aphrodite is a shipwreck introduces pitches, a register, and an instrument that had not been part of the initial texture, hinting at the beginning of the verse. I consider the refrain to elide with the verse in this case, because the opening texture does not subvert itself until m. 23.

Figure 9: *Process Piece,* **excerpt, first verse**

The shift to implicit 6|8 in the winds and the voice is the most dramatic moment so far in the aria. This is also where I phased out the "fixation" motif, as evidenced by the decreasing repeated notes now moving stepwise, and introduced those associated with Aphrodite, such as the *arco* tremolo in the cello and the descending "tonality" pattern. These are also useful in evoking the "water" element of the verse, with an uncertainty of time signature, the rounded tones of the horn, and a fragmentation of what had been steady chords into arpeggios. All these elements contribute to the disjunction of the second refrain.

Figure 10: *Process Piece,* **excerpt, second refrain part 1**

The initial shift of the pizzicato to the off-beat is preserved here, and the flute and clarinet remain in the same dotted half notes that defined the first refrain. However, with the introduction of the oboe on the Galatea motif, and the flute's shift up to the piccolo, the emphasis is transferred to the second beat of the measure:

Figure 11: *Process Piece,* **excerpt, second refrain part 2**

The elided introduction of the wind element of the verse—the clarinet's ascending run— leads up to a drastic shift in instrumentation. The off-beat pulse is transferred to the piccolo, and

the cello pizzicato becomes instead a series of harmonic glissandi, *on* the beat. This uncertainty of pitch and the increased relevance of the shifting pulse become even further confused when the accelerando is introduced toward the end of the verse. However, even as the speed and the beat are modified, the pitches stabilize and flatten, returning to the repeated notes that signify fixation. All of a sudden it is not the *clay* that has Pygmalion's attention, but the subject.

Figure 12: *Process Piece,* **excerpt, second verse**

The second verse produces the most dramatic change in the refrain; where the clarinet and flute had always been in fixed registers and harmonic dyads, now they are marked by a registral disparity of over an octave and are playing in counterpoint. The motif of fixation—the pulse of the cello pizzicato—is also absent and has blurred into tremolo, supported by the bassoon. Nevertheless, because the instrumentation is the same, the texture has not changed enough to discount that the passage is still considered a refrain—or it has changed sufficiently, but with allusion enough to what it *was* to be memorable.

Figure 13:*Process Piece,* **excerpt, third refrain**

Additionally, of the three refrains that precede verses, the third refrain is not elided to the third verse, and the division is texturally distinct. This also marks the only time in either of Pygmalion's arias that the time signature *changes* from a 3|4. To this point, he has done all but actually confound it; he has been drawn percussively off-beat during *Working Song*, he has hinted at 6|8 in measures of 3|4 but not actually gone there, and the hypermeter that pervades *Process Piece* has only just tapered off. Once he has lost his focus on the clay, and fixated on the subject—Aphrodite—even the time signature he is characterized by begins to chip away. This device receives its culmination in the *Finale*, when Pygmalion turns his pain against Aphrodite by poking a 5|8-shaped hole in her 6|8 argument.

Figure 14: *Process Piece,* **excerpt, transition between third refrain and third verse**

In the third verse, the fixation motif has become the fire element and abandoned the refrain completely, recontextualizing itself as helpless anger. Pygmalion's vocal line is characterized by the motif's oblique motion, while the clusters in the orchestra appropriate the tremolo and fluttertongue from the previous refrain. The crescendo shape that motivates the entire opera is the most marked in this section; appropriately, one of the opera's core messages is being projected as the climax of this aria, clear and bright and steady and tutti, in the part of the tenor's range which no one can ignore.

Figure 15: *Process Piece,* **excerpt, climax**

The texture of the chord that underscores "ash" is one that is only used at this point in the opera; it is an open hexachord, with the tenor providing the centralizing note, and every player at maximum volume. It takes a gesture this jarring to return the refrain to—almost—its former state, but the verses (the elements) have done their damage, and disrupted the foundation of the work. The pitches are the same, but the cello is on its off-beat pulse and an octave lower, and what had been the constant dotted half-note motion of the flute and clarinet is now quicker, shouldering what had been the cello's hemiola. Pygmalion's vocal interjections are also an octave lower, in a more stable and darker register for the tenor. This implies a resigned or forced fixation, not the intuitive one that was established at the start of the aria.

Figure 16: *Process Piece,* **excerpt, fourth refrain and end**

Aphrodite turns Pygmalion's admonishment back on him, and rips him out of his reverie. There is no space for applause at the end of this aria; Galatea steals Pygmalion's last note (an A-440) and begins the *Interlude* instead. I use this brutally manipulative Brechtian device to prevent the audience from immersing itself in the emotional, cathartic content and to remind the viewers of the rational and intellectual situation that is being discussed. When applied to opera, in which the audience has already greatly suspended its disbelief, a sudden spoken passage can serve to great emotional effect as well.

33

4.0   CONCLUSIONS

I am a storyteller. My music is best understood in a literary context; or, more to the point, the libretto of the opera is so intrinsically wedded to the music, and vice versa, that it is impractical and incomplete to discuss either aspect separately. My music is not just a means of conveying the drama, and my drama is not merely an excuse for the music. I will say that I strove for Gesamtkunstwerk in *Pygmalion,* as I do in many of my compositions.

I find it interesting that, as I composed very little music other than *Pygmalion* this past semester, I wrote quite a bit of prose fiction "on the side" to offset the mental imbalance posed by an excess of orchestration and musical minutiae. However, several of these recent short stories have an inherent musical element to them, crucial to appreciating the work as a whole. An analysis of the jazz standard "All of Me" through darkening point-counterpoint; a hermaphrodite grieving over a lost love, correlating herself with Orpheus as rendered by Marilyn Horne; an appropriation of *Madame Butterfly* to a culture clash in 2011 Nagasaki; all of these stories refuse to be dissociated from the songs that they are woven into, and the songs that are woven into me. To the same extent that prevents me from divorcing my words and my music, I cannot divorce either from myself.

Pygmalion is the story of that sentiment. Whatever other levels have grown in the telling, *Pygmalion* is the story of a creator who could not be separated from the work.

To a great extent, I am the work. Not just in my role as the composer of *Pygmalion,* though here, the meta-creative aspect is overt; and not just in the case of my performing the role of Galatea, who is, literally, the work. To a great extent, I am what I do, because what I do shapes who I am. That is the relationship between *this* composer and *this* work; she's me.